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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 002636

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/BCLTV, PRM. HQ USPACOM FOR FPA HUSO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/08/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREF](#) [TH](#) [BM](#) [BURMA](#)

SUBJECT: BURMESE PRO-DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT IN THAILAND: DOWN
BUT NOT OUT

REF: A) CHIANG MAI 87 B) RANGOON 440

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert J. Clarke, Reason: 1.4 (d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Nearly 2,000 out of 2,707 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) persons of concern (POC) have reported to Thai immigration offices in Bangkok and three provincial offices in Northern and Western Thailand. The largest number reported to the Mae Sot immigration office in Tak province, where 786 persons showed up to register and were later transported to the remote Nu Pho refugee camp on the Thai Burma border. In Bangkok, 243 more registered and await transport to border camps. All the POCs who registered by March 31 know that they are eligible for potential -- even likely -- resettlement to a third country in the near future. Burmese pro-democracy groups are still concerned and evaluating their tenuous status in Thailand and the effect the loss of some of their membership, many of whom have reported to Nu Pho as POCs, could have on their struggle. The groups' Thai government contacts, who have so far allowed them to operate in Thailand, have been silent about the future, leading some Burmese activists to call this initial post-deadline phase a "honeymoon period." END SUMMARY.

MOST POCs REGISTER FOR MOVEMENT TO REFUGEE CAMPS

12. (U) Out of 2,707 POCs on a list agreed to by the Royal Thai government (RTG) and UNHCR as eligible for POC status and thus required by the RTG to be in the refugee camps by March 31, 1,995 voluntarily registered and 752 did not. 418 persons were moved to the Ban Don Yang Camp in Sangklaburi Province, 410 persons to the Tham Hin Camp in Ratchaburi province, and 786 were moved to Nu Pho camp in Tak province. 243 persons registered in Bangkok at the Special Detention Center (SDC), and another 49 persons were allowed to stay in Bangkok hospitals for medical reasons. Those at the SDC will be moved at a later date to one of the border camps.

PROCESSING TO CAMPS GOES SMOOTHLY

13. (U) During a trip to Mae Sot on April 4 and 5, Poloff met with staff from the refugee relief assistance NGO, Thai-Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), and representatives of the UNHCR. Our contacts commented that in light of the relatively short notice (the official decision to enforce the March 31 deadline was announced on March 7), the transfer of the 786 persons who registered from Mae Sot town to the Nu Pho camp went very well. They noted that morale among the Burmese POCs was generally upbeat. Even after the 5 hour drive from Mae Sot town to Nu Pho, the new arrivals seemed to be settling in well. There was a shortage of permanent housing but construction for new housing had already begun. Most of the POCs were scattered throughout the camp, residing in Buddhist temples, mosques, schools and community centers. 87 former staff and their families from Dr. Cynthia Maung's Mae Tao clinic were among the new arrivals and staying in some of the new permanent housing and assisting in the monitoring of 14 unaccompanied minors, including several former child soldiers. Approximately 17 persons (49 including dependents) were allowed to stay out of the camp for medical reasons, most of them pregnant women. 40 per cent of the POCs are Karen, another 40 per cent are Burman and the remaining 20 per cent are of various ethnic groups, including some from the Arakan youth organization.

14. (U) Many of the POCs had already sent complaints to NGOs about the spartan living conditions: thin mattresses on floors, no electricity, no cell phones and no computers or internet access. Yet many, including several medics, medical doctors and teachers, also readily chipped in to organize and provide assistance. Because of their help, UNHCR and TBBC noted, registration and movement to the camp went smoothly.

15. (U) One problem noted in the media was the alleged presence of Burmese military intelligence on the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge. Several witnesses confirmed seeing a uniformed Burmese officer photographing POCs in the Thai Immigration compound at the foot of the bridge on the Thai side. UNHCR and TBBC staff at the registration site could not, however, confirm the presence of Burmese intelligence in the actual compound as reported in some press reports.

DR. CYNTHIA'S CLINIC: QUIET BUT STILL WORKING

16. (C) Mae Tao clinic founder, Dr. Cynthia Maung, and several of her staff spoke with Poloff in an unusually quiet office at her famous clinic, which has been providing healthcare to Burmese refugees, internally displaced persons (IDP) and migrants for over 15 years. Symptomatic of changes underway in the Burmese exile community in Mae Sot, the clinic had just a handful of outpatients there for treatment, but several beds were full with the usual patient load of pregnant women, new mothers and several cases of malaria. Dr. Cynthia lamented the loss of 87 of her 200 staff over the last 18 months, 30 of whom left last week. "Our work here in Mae Sot will be affected the most," she said, adding that many of her office staff and most experienced trainers had left for Nu Pho. Her immigration status in Thailand or "permit to stay" and those of 10 others at Mae Tao clinic is unaffected. She also admitted that there is an unending stream of workers from inside Burma willing to replace the lost staff. The problem is training them. Dr. Cynthia noted that the clinic's work with IDPs inside Burma will be mostly unaffected as those working with medical "backpack" teams don't stay in Thailand anyway.

BURMESE POLITICAL GROUPS: WORKING WITH LESS

17. (C) On the political side, the Association for Assistance to Political Prisoners (AAPP) is now down to about 3 to 4 core leaders, according to the group's Joint Secretary, Bo Kyi, who met with Poloff in Bangkok on his way to the United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) meeting in Geneva. At Bo Kyi's urging, Poloff agreed not try to contact other AAPP representatives in Mae Sot at this sensitive time. Bo Kyi noted that the AAPP may move its office in Mae Sot in the near future and play a very low key role on the Thai side, although he maintained that his group's assistance activities to political prisoners inside Burma will remain mostly unaffected.

18. (C) In Chiang Mai, ConGen hosted a lunch discussion on April 1 for Bangkok Poloff and Burmese information groups that conduct journalism and human rights documentation training. Pro-democracy dissidents who also attended outlined many of the concerns highlighted in Ref A and expressed apprehension about colleagues and family who had already registered in Mae Sot town and been transported to Nu Pho camp. All of the groups U.S. officers spoke with, except the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB), have lost staff. Many of the senior leaders of dissident organizations had a POC letter from UNHCR but have either turned the letter in to the Mae Sot UNHCR or have just not shown up to register. These exiles have made separate arrangements that allow them to operate in Thailand, either getting a Burmese "passport" with a Thai visa, or a work permit under Thailand's migrant labor scheme. These are usually arranged with help through Thai intelligence and/or Ministry of Interior or Police and are usually under a different name.

LOST SOME "FOOT SOLDIERS"

19. (C) Representatives from Internews, the Open Society Institute (OSI), the National League for Democracy--Liberated Area (NLD-LA), the National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB) and the Human Rights Education Institute of Burma (HREIB) all had a similar message -- we've lost many of our "foot soldiers" who served as office workers performing data entry, bookkeeping, and word processing, to produce the varied human rights and information publications along the border. But the front-line leadership of many of these groups is, for now, OK.

BUT THE WORK WILL GO ON...

10. (C) While HREIB, which conducts training in human rights documentation and reporting and other capacity-building activities, doesn't have a human resources problem, the ability of its staff and trainees to travel easily and to train in Thailand, is severely limited at this time. The "fee" for one-way travel for three persons from Mae Sot to Chiang Mai (350 kilometers) is now up to 7,000 baht (\$185), including a complementary Thai intelligence escort. One training session can cost over 30,000 baht (\$790), just for travel expenses. Without these special arrangements, trainers and trainees would be subject to arrest by police and immigration. Most groups operating in Mae Sot feel that they are relatively safe on their own in the town of Mae Sot. But when HREIB last year tried to conduct training, the site was raided by Thai immigration on the second day and everyone was asked to leave.

..PERHAPS MORE ON THE OTHER SIDE

11. (C) The real change of focus for HREIB will most likely be their trainees. They expect that most of their future trainees now will come from inside Burma, from ethnic Karen,

Kayah, Karenni and Shan groups who don't operate much on the Thai side anyway. HREIB staff admitted this was not necessarily a bad thing but will require a shift in where the training sessions are held, who does the training and the frequency of follow up sessions.

NLD AFFECTED BUT STILL TALKING ACTIVELY

12. (C) Nyo Ohn Myint of the NLD-LA stated that his group is among the most affected -- down to 5 members from a high of 230 several years ago. The leadership now has to pull "double duty," attending meetings in Thailand or abroad, while trying to maintain day-to-day production of newsletters, email alerts and funding proposals. Ngo Ohn Myi noted that Mae Sot almost seems like a "ghost town". Most activists felt more at risk there than in Chiang Mai, where they can blend with the much larger urban population. He added that outside Chiang Mai many Burmese exiles are frequently subject to pressure for bribes by police, whether at traffic stops or anywhere in public. (Note: Poloff noted four checkpoints along the drive east from Mae Sot to the provincial capital of Tak. End Note.)

13. (C) While the NLD LA and representatives from the Burma Fund, Win Min and Aung Naing Oo, were lamenting their situation in Mae Sot, they perked up when they spoke of activities inside Burma. They claimed to have regular, back channel communications with Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK). (Note: Embassy Rangoon notes that ASSK's ability to communicate with anyone outside of her compound remains highly restricted and no independent observer is known to have seen her since UN Special Envoy Razali visited Burma in March 2004. End Note.) Win Min stated that the NLD has plans for a coordinated public action on June 18, ASSK's birthday, which may include work stoppages, stay at home campaigns, or complete avoidance of major public area, such as temples, markets or other public gathering places.

14. (C) The National Council of the Union of Burma (NCUB),s Political Defiance Committee (PDC) representative in Mae Sot told poloff that he was enthused by recent public statements by Buddhist clergy critical of the SPDC and the "unregistered" vehicles seized from Khin Nyunt cronies, some of which were apparently donated to temples and now must be returned to the GOB (See Ref B). The monks claimed that some senior monks had criticized SPDC leaders not only for their failure to control corruption, but also for involving the clergy by donating contraband to temples. Poloff's PDC source also gave details of recent arrivals in the border area, including two eyewitnesses to the May 2003 Depayin incident which led to the deaths of at least 70 persons and the re-arrest of ASSK. The arrivals also included three former immigration and police officers with former military intelligence connections who fled Burma for fear of arrest.

KAREN GROUPS MOSTLY UNAFFECTED FOR NOW

15. (C) Karen National Union (KNU) executive committee members David Tharckabaw and Mahn Sha Lah Phan (also of the NCUB PDC), told poloff that they see the POC deadline to report to camps as just another victory for the "business interests," a win over the "nationalist interests" in the Thai military and government. Both said that they still have local support from the intelligence and military community along the border, but appeared uncertain about how long they can hold out against Thai business goals of developing "national economic zones" in Tak province and beyond. They said they expected the U.S. to intervene if there were a "crackdown", i.e. arrest and deportation by the Thais. They sensed the Thais are so preoccupied at the moment with problems in the South of Thailand that they hadn't much time to worry about the Burma border. The recent failure of cease-fire talks and their apparent "down-grading," where only a SPDC regional commander was present who would only discuss certain areas of Karen territory, was not well received by either KNU membership or the Thais after the KNU delegation returned last month. Subsequently, pressure from the Thai to come to some sort of cease-fire agreement has lessened.

16. (C) Our KNU contacts stated that, by their estimation, the Burmese Army (BA) along the Karen front is in a shambles. Low morale, poor health, sanitation and food, and many instances of human rights violations indicate a demeaned and undisciplined BA force, they said. The KNU said the Burmese soldiers are easy to track and to evade, often are commanded by very junior officers, and often use child soldiers as porters or to lay landmines. One recent SPDC defector told them, "We are officers in name only." (Comment: Local religious and community leaders in the Karen State capital of Hpa-An told visiting Embassy Rangoon officers on April 7 that "there is no question" the GOB is the most influential authority in Karen State and that BA troops are in "firm and confident control" of almost all territory in the state. End Comment). Only a few active KNU members opted for POC status and transfer to camps, so Tharckabaw and Mahn Sha claimed that their administrative and organizing activities inside

claimed KNU territory in Burma will remain unaffected. However, the KNU executive committee members did appear concerned about their communications and public relations platform in Thailand being more restricted or even taken away. Poloff inquired about the former "rebel capital" of Manerplaw, which was taken by the Burma Army in 1995 and was at one time home to representatives from various ethnic rebel armies, nearly all of which now enjoy cease-fire agreements of one kind or another with the SPDC. The KNU contacts maintained that they could easily retake it but don't have the resources to maintain and hold it as a base if the Burma Army were to mount a counteroffensive

17. (C) Poloff also met with the executive members of the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People CIDKP). They described their position as "tenuous," but said the RTG tolerates them as long as they remain exclusively in Mae Sot. This does not really present a problem, as their relief and education activities, focused across the border in Karen state, do not require them to go beyond Mae Sot (and as long as there is not significant spillover fighting along the border). The CIDKP noted that since former Burmese Prime Minister Khin Nyunt's ouster in October 2004, there has been an increased tempo of attacks by the SPDC as well as more reports of human rights violations.

18. (C) Comment: After granting several extensions, the RTG stood firm on its March 31 deadline for "urban refugees" to register to enter camps to await resettlement. The RTG message and position was: you are either a refugee in the camp, a POC in the refugee camp awaiting a resettlement interview, or a registered migrant worker. At this time, the RTG does not seem inclined to pursue a course of all-out door-to-door arrests and subsequent deportations of Burmese who do not fall into these categories. (Note: NSC Chief General Winai recently reiterated privately that the RTG has no intention of doing any such thing. End Note.) While many of the Burmese pro-democracy movements based here believe that this latest development will have an impact on their effectiveness, most of them also acknowledge that they are still able to continue to perform limited work under "special arrangements" with their "Thai friends," i.e. sympathetic Thai intelligence or security authorities. Many Burmese political activists view the movement of the POCs to the camps as a significant uptick in the ebb and flow of Thai restrictions on their activities, but many of their groups had already been losing people to resettlement over the last year and a half. The RTG deadline just speeded up this process. It should be remembered that the registrants choosing to go to the camps believe that they will be resettled within a relatively near future, many to the United States. One longtime Australian expat in Chiang Mai, an ardent supporter of the Karen and many Burmese activists, noted to Poloff, "Maybe the Thais are doing the Burmese activists a favor," by insisting on the POC deadline. END COMMENT.

19. (U) This message was cleared by Chiang Mai and Rangoon. BOYCE